

## Unharvested

For Thanksgiving

II Corinthians 11:3:6 - The simplicity that is in Christ

I have a gift for you this morning, a line from a poem by Robert Frost called "Unharvested." When you go home, look it up in your own copy of Robert Frost. If you don't have a copy of Robert Frost, you should be ashamed of yourself.

In "Unharvested," Frost tells of walking in a country lane and of a pleasant, fresh fragrance in the air. He looked over a stone wall to find out what it was and where it came from, and discovered that on the other side of the wall was an apple orchard. The apples of one of the trees had fallen and lay ungathered in the grass. Undisturbed, they had begun to turn themselves into cider. It was their fragrance the poet had caught, and it set him thinking. Poets are careful observers. They not only see, but perceive. And their perceptions often kindle their feelings, and then their emotions clamor for expression and we find ourselves with a new poem. Listen to the last verse of "Unharvested":

May something always go unharvested,  
May much stay out of our stated plan,  
Apples, or something forgotten and left  
So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.

"May something always go unharvested." There is a philosophy of life in that sentence. If we make it our own, it could change many an attitude that needs changing: what we do and what we leave undone; whether we spend our days in quiet desperation or possess the peace of the humble in spirit; whether we struggle to fulfill all our ends before our end, or learn to "go gentle into that good night." If we were content to allow something to go unharvested in our life, it would improve our perspective, change our priorities, refine our humor, and broaden our appreciation. But I have better reasons even than those why we should heed Frost's exhortation. Notice, then:

### **I. Some things will be unharvested by necessity.**

A shrewd mind once remarked that we can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements. This means that the commercials on television may be the truest part of it. However fictitious, commercials are no fiction. What do they tell us about our ideals? What are we to make of it when, for example, a brewery asks, "Who says you can't have it all?" Frank Sinatra declares in ungrammatical melody, "You and me, we wanted it all." Who says Frank and his friend can't have it all? Well, Katharine Hepburn says they can't, and I agree with her. She is a gifted, intelligent and feisty lady. When she was interviewed on television recently, she declared unequivocally that "You can't have it all." If you have this, you really can't have that. For the most part, we cannot have both/and but must choose either/or. And if Miss Hepburn's wisdom, born of long and well-understood experience doesn't have authority enough for us, let me tell you of powers, energies and other varied phenomena which declare the same truth and allow us no room for debate. Time

says it. Experience says it. Life says it. We really can't have it all, for there are books we won't have time to read and places we won't have time to visit. There is music we will never hear and there are friendships that will never ripen. We don't have enough time to go everywhere, read everything and know everybody. The Irish tell us that when God made time He made plenty of it. But this time they are lying. You can believe them only if you are young. Only the young think there is enough time, for they imagine they are immortal.

You don't need a preacher to tell you this. If you have a competent physician he will tell you that it is good for your heart, and will reduce your chances of having a stroke, if you reconcile yourself to life's unfinishedness. That is the nature of it. Solzhenitsyn knows it. He knows that if he does his work every waking hour of every working day for the rest of his life, he can't finish it. Camus knew it. He tells us that we hate death "because it makes the lie definitive." What lie? The lie that we have endless time to improve our mind, or our figure, or our soul. John Betjeman knew it. Listen to the words he gave a woman who, in "Sun and Fun," ran out of time:

There was sun enough for lazing upon beaches,  
There was fun enough for far into the night.  
But I'm dying now and done for,  
What on earth was all the fun for?  
For I'm old and ill and terrified and tight.

If what I have just said is the truth of the matter, then we had better get our priorities right. If we can't do everything, then we'd better make sure that the things we do are worth doing. Not long ago I talked to a dear old friend I hadn't seen in many years. Presuming on our friendship, I asked him, "What do you want to do before you die?" That is a good question and there need be nothing morbid about it.

Frost says we shouldn't feel resentful if something is left unharvested. Harvest everything and the air loses its sweetness. Why, then, should we rush to gather everything? Why should we, indeed? And one of the reasons why our resentment is inappropriate is that it is a form of ingratitude. We can't harvest everything because there is so much to harvest, and that ought to move us to thankfulness, not resentment. We are like the Irish farmer who complained in a bumper year that there were no small potatoes for the pigs.

Another poet tells us that it is by His high superfluosity that we know our God. God not only meets our need, but does so with beauty of form and color. He forbids the weeds to multiply without blossom and the birds without song. He makes even the necessary embrace of breeding beautiful also as fire, and throws beauty above the moon and puts rainbows in the domes of deep sea-shells. What He gives is "good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over." Should a man who pushes himself back from the table exclaiming "I'm full!" be petulant that he cannot eat more? Why, "the world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings."

When King Lear's ungrateful daughter began to reduce the number of the old man's servants it was, she said, because he didn't need them. When her father can

bear the humiliation no longer he cries, "Reason not the need!" He was a King! God "reasons not the need" with a "nicely calculated less or more." He multiplies His bounty, making a million acorns when eleven might have been enough. Like Mozart. In Amadeus, the Emperor complains to the composer, "Too many notes!" But Mozart knew better, for his creativity was prodigal. And so is God's. Are there too many stars, do you think, and is space too big? Or do you like the sense of far distance and eternally moving horizons? Would you be happier if, instead of being overwhelmed by the greatness of the universe, you were confined by its limits? How could you think of God if there were no sky, or sea? Did God make too many colors, flavors, species? If all this abundance is a cause of dissatisfaction, then we should complain that in His extravagance God made too many ungrateful people. Here are words from the Hebrew Morning Service:

Though our mouths were full of song as the sea, and our tongues of exultation as the multitude of its waves, and our lips of praise as the wide-extended firmament; though our eyes shone with light like the sun and the moon, and our hands were spread forth like the eagles of heaven, and our feet were swift as hinds, we should still be unable to thank thee and to bless thy name, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, for one thousandth or one ten thousandth part of the bounties which thou hast bestowed upon our fathers and upon us.

Here is another necessary reason why much will remain unharvested. It is because there is so much in you that you will never come to the end of it. Will you run out of imagination, or interest, or creativity, or love? Would you wish to set a limit on your power of appreciation or your capacity for friendship? Would it please us to have no smiles left, or to have used up our sense of humor? Surely what makes these qualities endlessly engaging is that they are endless. You can't exhaust them. And once you realize it, resentment dies and thankfulness increases. You learn to like unfinishedness.

It says something important about the nature of the human spirit that we run out of time before we run out of ideas. Everybody knows that Schubert's "Symphony No. 8 in B minor" is his "Unfinished." But did you know that Beethoven and Mahler both wrote "Tenth" symphonies which they never finished; and that Bruckner's magnificent "Ninth" has no finale? The most spectacular of Puccini's operas, Turandot, was incomplete and had to be finished by another composer. Isn't it cause for gratitude that we die in the fullness of our years with melodies still in our heads, and poems to write and pictures to paint and people to love? I spent thirteen of the happiest years of my life as Minister of Metropolitan Church in London, Ontario. For thirteen years I preached there. Yet I ran out of Sundays before I ran out of sermons. I am sure that ministers enter Heaven with the words, "As I was saying last week..." Imagine our desolation if there was nothing more about God we wanted to say! It is much better to say all we can say in the time we have, and add, "these are but the fringes of His ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of Him." We never come to the end of this world of wonders, or of the wonder we are. But we ought not to resent it, or even to be merely reconciled to it. We ought to celebrate it.

If this unfinishedness is by necessity, then it is necessity of the happiest sort, itself a good gift of God.

## **II. Something in our life should remain unharvested for the sake of generosity.**

There was a merciful law in Israel that directed the reapers of a field of corn, and the gatherers of vineyard grapes, not to gather every ear or pluck every bunch. Part of the harvest must remain unharvested so that the gleaners-the poor, the widows, the strangers-could find something to refresh and sustain them. To leave something unharvested was legislated mercy. And some made a blessing of necessity and harvested kindness by leaving something unharvested.

This practice gives us one of the tenderest stories in the Bible. The Scriptures tell how Ruth, a Moabitess, a gentile, having come to Bethlehem, went gleaning in the fields of Boaz. In Keats' lovely lines, "sick for home, she stood in tears amid the alien corn." Boaz saw her, and loved her, and made sure that as the reapers went through they left more and more for her to gather for herself. Ruth married Boaz, and Ruth's blood is in our Jesus. Think of it, a gentile woman in His ancestry! And all because Boaz allowed something to go unharvested.

It is like that with our own abundance. Every time we eat we say "grace." Grace is gratitude, an acknowledgement that what we have, we have received; that we all sit down at a feast we did not prepare, a table we did not spread; and if our grace is gracious, it will ask God to keep us mindful of the needs of others. This means that we shouldn't keep everything for ourselves. As Job tells us, it is wicked of us to eat our morsel alone. Always figuratively, and sometimes literally, we furnish a table for the hungry and homeless of our world.

It is not just a matter of food and money, though; it is also a matter of sensitivity, delicacy, restraint. Nearly twenty years ago I went with a friend, a young lawyer, to buy some trout flies from an elderly physician who had suffered a heart attack and could no longer go fishing. The hand-tied flies were exquisite little works of art that might well have been framed and hung on a wall to delight all who saw them. There were seven boxes of them, and I allowed my lawyer friend to make the deal. To my surprise he bargained for six boxes and bought them, leaving the seventh. I said nothing while the negotiations went on, but couldn't wait to ask him why he hadn't bought the seventh box. He said that it seemed unkind to do so. The physician needed to remember what it was like to wade a stream, casting a fly. Perhaps having some flies of his own might set him dreaming, and he would know that if he did recover enough strength to make a trip to the river, he would have good flies with which to deceive the wily trout.

I have never forgotten that. My friend's action was full of the consideration and restraint born of respect. He left something ungathered from a deep sense of caring. Leaving things unharvested leaves room for others; it is a recognition that they have their place and that what we have received is not only a gift, but a trust. We don't

need to pick all the flowers, indeed, we may choose not to pick any and still be more than content:

I will be the gladdest thing  
Under the sun!  
I will touch a hundred flowers  
And not pick one.

Leaving things unharvested might save our world. We don't need to take everything just because it's there, as though we have no responsibility to leave something for someone else. We don't need to kill all the whales, trap all the birds, catch all the fish, cut down all the trees, pluck all the flowers. Perhaps all we need is the least that will really do; which is a pretty fair definition of parsimony, which has nothing at all to do with meanness, and is a virtue for all seasons.

Someone said once that we ought to give to others because when we do, we are doing what God does. By leaving something for others we reflect in some faint way the brightness of the divine benevolence. We forgive because God has forgiven us; we are gracious because we have received grace; we are merciful because we have obtained mercy. And if we leave part of the field or vineyard or orchard to the gleaners, it is because the world with its harvest is not ours. As that heavenly man Thomas Traherne reminds us, "you never enjoy the world aright till you remember how lately you were made and how wonderful it was when you came into it." Let something go unharvested in gratitude for the generosity of God.

### **III. Let something go unharvested for continuity.**

In his letter to the Christians at Corinth, the Apostle Paul reminds them that while he had played an important part in their Christian awakening and growth, he hadn't done everything. His role had been crucial, but others had done their bit too. Paul had sowed the seeds of faith, but Apollos had watered them and, of course, it was God who made them grow. Our limited gifts leave room for the gifts of others. Limited like our own, they are nevertheless different from our own and will complement them. By leaving something for someone else to do we allow them their part in the continuing work of the Kingdom.

Again, that is what God has done. We sometimes sing:

Creation's Lord, we give you thanks  
That this your world is incomplete.

This incompleteness means that there is something for us to do. God didn't compose all the symphonies, write all the poems, paint all the pictures. He didn't build all the ships, plant all the peanuts, invent all the fragrances. The greatness of the divine creativity is that He makes His world through creatures who are themselves in the process of being made. Our working together with God is part of His making of us. It is not merely that He has left room for us, but that the room He has left us to write and paint and compose creates us as it furthers God's creative purpose.

In the same way, we should leave room for others. It diminishes people if they feel they have nothing to offer us, no gift they can bring. I knew a man once who was, as we say, "generous to a fault." He was eager to give, but unable to take. It made the relationship lop-sided, and limited its depth, for he wouldn't allow anyone to give him anything. Yet his friends needed to give. To be recipients of his generosity was not enough; they wished to express their own.

Scott of the Antarctic wrote to J. M. Barrie telling him:

I never met a man in my life whom I admired and loved more than you,  
but I never could show you how much your friendship meant to me,  
for you had much to give and I had nothing.

That is a sad letter. It is also untrue. Though we may not have much to give, we have something, and it is important to our sense of personal worth that we be allowed to give it. There are those who must always pick up the check at lunch; but sometimes we ought to allow someone else to pay for the meal. It may be important to them that they be permitted to do so. To let something go unharvested gives room and place to others.

All great works of art are unharvested in this sense. They need others to make them complete. Writing about poetry, Dylan Thomas said that every great poem has gaps in it, into which the reader's own meaning may "creep, crawl, flash or thunder in." The writer's poem is not finished without a reader. When someone asked Robert Frost if he minded when people discovered meanings in his poems which he did not intend, he replied, "Not so long as they elevate them." There is always more meaning in a poem than the poet put into it, and perceptive readers can find more than the poet knew.

Indeed, this sermon cannot be complete without you. It waits on your response. What are you going to do with it? Some of you will find deeper things in it than I knew or intended. Your own experience will enable you to discover more insights than I know, and in this way you will elevate it.

We are all debtors. Our success is possible only by the hard work of others. Indeed, our success may rest on what others considered their failure. The music of Gustav Mahler, for a example, is enjoying enormous popularity, and is distinctively his own. Yet Mahler is indebted to a young composer who believed himself such a failure that in despair, he took his own life. Mahler found his manuscripts and made them his own, taking them to his mind and heart, and touching them with his own genius. We do not know where the young composer left off and Mahler began. We do not need to. All we know is Mahler's greatness, and his indebtedness not only to Beethoven and Wagner, but to Hans Rott, of whom few have ever heard.

**IV. We have said that we must, and should, let something go unharvested by reason of necessity, generosity and continuity. Notice, last, that something should go unharvested because of life's ambiguity.**

One of the greatest of our Lord's parables is that of the wheat and the tares. In it, the landowner's men found that even though their master had sown only good

seed, darnel had sprung up among the wheat. What were they to do; weed out the darnel? The landlord instructed them not to do so. He issued a warning against weeding, for in the early stages of growth darnel and wheat are hard to distinguish, and in the later stages hard to separate. Premature weeding would mean that much wheat would be lost. Better to allow them to grow together until harvest when separation would be easier.

That is another powerful argument for allowing something to go unharvested in our lives. Events and experiences are ambiguous, and the good and the bad are inextricably bound up. Haven't you noticed that our sins are often qualities that have got out of hand? And how are we to decide which experiences are a blessing, and which a curse, before they have run their course and come to fulfillment? That is why judgment before the end is always premature. Judgment has to do with meaning, and to decide the meaning of events and experiences is often impossible before they have worked themselves out, or we have worked them out. It is often recognized only in retrospect.

Some of us are prone to judge others too quickly. We make serious mistakes concerning them because we don't know enough about them. Says the ghost of Hamlet's father concerning his Queen, "Leave her to Heaven." That is advice we need to hear. In our eagerness to judge we judge prematurely and presumptuously. We decide who is fit for Heaven and who is not, who is right and who is wrong, who is moral and who is not. Yet the one thing of which we can be sure is that the day of judgment will bring many surprises. We have that on our Lord's authority. There will be cries of astonishment from those who are kept out, and gasps of incredulity from many who are invited in.

This ambiguity touches our own lives when we are tempted to assess the meaning of things before they are properly over. Not long ago, a member of my church told me that she had experienced a very difficult few months. Troubles when they came, came not single spies, but in battalions. One of the most perplexing things was to be unable to find any apparent meaning in it all. It was clouded, mixed up, ambiguous. She discovered that the only thing to do is come through the distressing circumstances with courage, refusing to yield to a self-pity or despair. The meaning, if it is to be found at all, will be discovered later. Kierkegaard once said that life must be lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards. What happens to us is often ambiguous. Wisdom waits for harvest in the hope that what baffles us now will become clear. Ultimately, we await the judgment of God, for God's judgment is the truth of things.

One of the most helpful things Malcolm Muggeridge ever said-indeed he said it in the preface he so kindly wrote to my book *A Lover's Quarrel With the World*-was that life is a drama, not a process. But if life is to be understood as a drama, its meaning will not be clear until the end. Who ever judged a drama before the last act?

Here are three sentences from Reinhold Niebuhr, enormously comforting in their trust and patience:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime,  
therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense  
in any immediate context of history,  
therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we can do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone,  
therefore, we are saved by love.

May something always go unharvested. And may we be saved by our Lord Christ  
whose work is faith, whose gift is hope and whose nature is love.